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VARNISHING DAY AT THE ACADEMY.

THE artist who is not a member of the Royal Academy only knows that his contribution to the year's exhibition has been accepted when he receives, a day or two before Varnishing Day, a politely worded invitation "to view such of your works as have been accepted." He may have received during the month that has elapsed since the things were sent in, an equally polite but firm request to "remove" something which has not met with the approval of the jury, but the failure to get the latter notice does not by any means signify that his work will decorate the Academy walls, for they have a curious way of accepting (conditionally) a great many more things than can possibly be placed, and then leaving it to the hanging committee to select such as will best fit the spaces left after the Academicians and Associates have been hung.

Consequently all the poor wretches who have not the right to tack "R. A." or "A. R. A." after their names are kept on tenterhooks till the very last moment, and even then after all may get the removal notice instead of the looked-for invitation "to view." Fortunately the latter sort appeared at the studio in due season, and I was able to attend.

A blue ticket, a signature, and we pass up the stairway where a servant in livery glances at our cards and admits us to the galleries, all alive with hundreds of artists, men and women. Here we shall see what during the past year these good folk have done — and much had better have been left undone — verily to show the rest this world beautiful!

Every one of the eleven rooms is comfortably filled; artists coming and going, some with smiling faces, and others looking desperate enough to renounce the world and its vanities. The ladders, two for each room, are very high; high enough to reach the last row, toward which the sad eyes are invariably turned. Every ladder has its occupant, who with water and sponge, palette and brushes, or varnish pot, is giving a final dab and caress to his petted and (perhaps) spoiled darling. In the center of the room is a long table; on it the paint boxes and palettes, the brushes and bottles, of those who are waiting their respective turns with the ladders, for each one has come prepared for emergencies.

In going from room to room one finds three kinds of pictures. The first hastens you on, the second holds out a friendly but timid hand, but the third instantly compels attention. To the latter class Abbey's "Scene from King Lear" belongs, and it will not let you by. A wealth of luxurious color teeming with vitality and strength, the picture is, nevertheless, perfectly consistent and harmonious. As, stopped by the color note and decorative ensemble, we grow interested and step nearer, the literary peg on which this artistic fabric depends, becomes at once and clearly apparent.



SKETCH BY GEORGE H. BROUGHTON
FOR HIS ACADEMY PICTURE.

From the Artist.

It is an added pleasure to find that the ability to tell the story, to depict subtle emotions, is as strong as the decorative conception and artistic execution. Cordelia stands in the center of the picture stage, so to speak, and is somewhat disdainfully bidding adieu to her two treacherous sisters, who are somewhat apart on the left. At her side France is gently raising to his lips the hand so lately given into his keeping. The foolish king, supported by Burgundy and the retinue, is just disappearing at the right of the apartment. Costumes and decorations are detailed almost to minuteness, and show most careful research and painstaking fidelity; always, however, kept in complete subordination to the general plan and scheme of the picture.

Perhaps one of the most valuable qualities of Mr. Abbey's work is its striking individuality. It does not remind you of anyone else or of any school. It is purely his own.

As we move along and see the many unsuccessful attempts to combine pure and brilliant colors, it is almost with a feeling of regret that we note that the sponge and varnish brush

are still active; for you may be sure that the handling of fifteen thousand pictures and the placing of nineteen hundred raises some dust, and it settles on bright and dull—"just and unjust"—alike. Oh, if in many instances it were only allowed to remain and soften the incongruous conglomeration of green, purple, orange and scarlet, our optical nerves would not so often cry out that painting is the most infernal art on earth—a very invention of the devil! Luckily, however, the unobjectionable and interesting if not actually fine things are in the majority, and after one gets used to it—acclimatized, as it were—the shrieking exhibition canvases are passed with a certain degree of tranquility.

Coming into Gallery No. IV, two life-size, full-length portraits stop you again as by command—one of a judge in gown and wig, the other a lady seated in an arm chair. They are painted by Orchardson, one of England's greatest living artists, and the reason for his great reputation is plain to be seen. Simple, quiet and dignified, without any striving for effect, they possess that indefinable something which denotes the hand of the master. Careful in drawing and firm in character, the result has been attained by the use of very little material. In the hands of almost any other painter his technic would produce an unpleasantly thin effect, but one does not mind the slight lack of solidity in his work, the other valuable qualities are so admirably realized. It is really astonishing what a result a little paint gently rubbed about will give, if you only know how.

After making the complete round of the galleries, thirteen in all, one is agreeably impressed with the fact that a half-dozen or so of our American artists make a most important mark in this great exhibition. Sargent, Abbey, Rolshoven, Shannon and Frank Millet all stand near to the "head of the class."

Sargent has eight portraits and shows in each of them that extraordinary mastery of material and artistic strength which has made him famous. The one of the banker Wertheimer seems to have created the most tremendous sensation, and all London is stirred up over it. As a technical performance it is simply superb, and as a piece of characterization it is so strong that it almost seems to be an epitomized transcription of a race. The subject—a man of middle age with keen, ruddy, smiling face—stands facing the spectator. One hand is carelessly thrust into the trousers pocket; the other holds a lighted cigar. An air of unusual content—not to say complacency—pervades the picture even to the well-groomed poodle in the corner, whose fresh pink tongue furnishes the one strong color note in an otherwise dark-toned arrangement. This portrait certainly brings home to one the truth that character is an even greater thing than the long-sought-for idealism.

Entirely different in all respects are the portraits by Shannon. He

shows five — two men, two women and a child. The figure of the child he calls "The White Mouse"; why that name does not appear, but it is a most charming scheme in gray-greens and whites, very broadly painted and harmonious. It tells the story of a little child and an armful of blossoms; a suggested tapestry at the back, and a floor. It hangs on the line and people stop to look.

The main charm of Shannon's work seems to lie in a certain vivacity of color, somewhat inclined to sweetness, and the pleasing expression of the faces he depicts; but one misses the surety of touch, the certainty of drawing and the force of character. It is as though he has not yet found out exactly what he wants to do, not yet the (for him) best way to do it. A stronger conviction — more of Shannon himself — would add a value his works do not yet possess.

The water colors and pastels are hung in a room by themselves. The strongest thing in this room is a pastel portrait of A. G. Macleay by Rolshoven. Its strength is largely in its delineation of character, and that most difficult of all characters to represent — a highly sensitive, refined, intelligent woman. Calm and reserved it is, at the same time sweet and sympathetic; every inch of the canvas bespeaks the lady. In color, soft grays and pinks, with a note of black in the velvet band about the throat. Mr. Rolshoven shows also two oils — a child's portrait in white, called "Little Would Be," and "The Refectory at San Dominiano at Assisi." The former is a large, upright canvas, and shows us a demure little miss who masquerades in grandmamma's cap and a voluminous silk gown. Childhood's ingenuous frankness looks you straight in the eyes, and contrasts most amusingly with the assumed air of elderly repose and dignity. A full brush of color, with direct forcible treatment, characterizes this as it does all of his work; but one wishes that this motive might have been treated a trifle more gently — with a little more sugar.

Millet shows only one canvas, and that a comparatively small one, but it well deserves its good place on the line. Two rosy-cheeked, laughing girls are roughly making friendly advances to the stiffest-necked Puritan that ever clasped a psalm-book. He does not smile — he could not — but another customer at the inn (probably), who sits with his back to us at a table, is fairly shaking with laughter. We cannot see his face, but we know he is, just the same.

Alma Tadema also shows only one — "The Conversion of Paula" — neither better nor worse than many others by the same hand; but you do not linger over it, because you feel that you have seen it so many times before.

H. H. La Thangue is an English artist whose name is comparatively unknown in America, but he is one of the strong men in this exhibition.

Farm life—figures and landscape—furnish his subjects, and all three of his pictures this year are fraught with nature and artistic feeling. Simple subjects all of them, homely and rugged, but they are seen with the eye of the poet and treated with the brush of the painter.

Frank Bramley is another who gives us a genuine treat with a farm scene—"A Dalesman's Clipping." From the old man in the foreground, who is just shearing the last lock of fleece from his denuded captive, to the collie, who is superintending the behavior of the waiting flock, every figure in the composition (there are seven) is doing something—and doing it with a will! "This is my busy day" is stamped all over it, and the same healthy vitality and "go" which animates the figures themselves is used in the manner of painting. It is an extremely clever thing, as is also Mr. Bramley's portrait of Alderman Sadler.

The largest picture in the exhibition is a decoration for the Royal Exchange, by Seymour Lucas. It is 10 by 17 feet, and the subject, "William the Conqueror Granting the First Charter to the City of London." It is light in color, well drawn, and a most effective decorative composition.

Next in size to Mr. Lucas' picture is "Love Triumphant," by Watts. It is allegorical, we are told. It is certainly ponderous. We must look at it because Mr. Watts painted it; but —

Carolus Duran has two portraits, Benjamin Constant one, and Bonnat one. One is a little surprised to find that the French masters do not, by any means, reach the high-water mark of this exhibition in portraiture. In comparison with Orchardson, Arthur Hacker, Richard Jack, J. Y. Hunter, Percy Bigland, Bramley and others, they fall short, and one is compelled to acknowledge that the English school is far ahead in that branch of the art. In landscape they do not make quite so good a showing, but there are many fine things by Alfred Parsons, David Murray, Alfred East, Ylend King and others. In sculpture the showing is not so good as in painting.

The general tendency is essentially modern and progressive, and the day of the old-time academician and his classical platitudes is surely drawing to a close.

This, then, O gentle reader, is only a shadow of personal impressions and delights caused by a visit to Burlington House. Of the many swiftly passing thoughts—the thoughts which are not objective—one might fill a book. 'Twas here Sir Joshua first inspired the English mind to further and encourage art. 'Twas his genius and his mind that first induced the British Government to furnish these magnificent galleries for the exhibition of artistic work.

London, 1898.

OLIVER DENNETT GROVER.